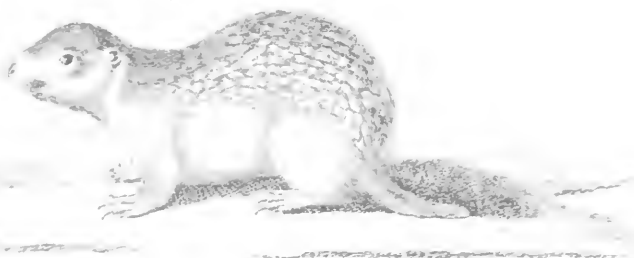


VOL. 30  
NO. 4  
SUMMER, 1981  
ONE DOLLAR

# Four Quarters



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# Four Quarters

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# Chair

FRANK D. MOORE

Henrietta Von Tassel begins "Dear Chair"  
in her letter of application for a job  
teaching English. Foolish Henrietta Von Tassel  
to write to me, for I am indeed furniture.  
These arms, coffee-stained and soaked  
with sweat, can frame no responses.  
I have no hands to lift and drop  
on typewriter keys, to compose rhythms,  
and with the flick of a little finger push  
the button, creating silence, self-correction.  
So, Gentleperson, you who have no  
stubs, cannot be told of metamorphosis  
from man to chair, the skin crackling,  
limbs petrified or cold as chromium.  
Or the day seven hiring committee members all  
sat down, and now I am known as Sofa.

My angles are splayed. My stuffing is knocked  
out and spreads like dust.  
My springs do not wait coiled;  
they are pulled straight, and rust.  
Please, someone still of flesh and bone,  
with hands of courtesy,  
carry me and place me on the curb,  
away from the polyethylene bags.  
I will await goodwill, its yellow van,  
a livingroom white and clean, someday.

# Playing The Game

JOANNE ZIMMERMAN

**I**N THE FORTIES, when Ben Pahlmann graduated from prep school, he decided he wanted to pursue a career in the theater, like his mother, the famous actress Mira Pahlmann. Ben made the rounds of auditions in New York; because of the shortage of actors during the war years he easily found work playing small roles in light comedy.

Delighted to be in residence with Mira for longer than the vacations between boarding school and summer camp, Ben moved into the room that had been her study, thumb-tacked to the walls autographed pictures of the stars of the plays in which he played bit parts, and dreamed of the day when their roles would be reversed. He tried to arrange his schedule so that he could cook meals; he chauffeured Mira and crashed the parties to which she had been invited; he read cues while she memorized lines and gave her his advice on interpretation. Undeniably helpful, he threw himself ecstatically into the role, and so was frequently in the way, especially when the man most in evidence around Mira, the director Victor Ackerman, was present.

Taller than Mira, with large red face, broad shoulders, and heavy-muscled, thick arms and legs, Victor had a high hard round belly which showed aggressively through silk shirts open halfway to the waist; he sported scarves tied at the neck. His voice boomed, even in small rooms (from shouting from the last rows of theaters at stupid actors, he said), so that Ben clearly heard Victor's share of every intimate conversation he and Mira had in bed.

The following June, Victor was scheduled to leave for Indiana to direct a summer theater. Ben, trying to fall asleep in the room across the dark hall from Mira's bedroom, heard Mira say firmly, "Well, I'm not going. I'm going to take this summer off and rest."

"Who is waiting in the wings, Mira?"

"No one, darling. I'll be right here when you get back, sitting on the porch swing."

"I'll buy a porch swing for you out there. You can spend the summer in it if you want to."

"... sitting on the porch swing," Mira repeated airily, "with daisies in my lap."

"Or your precious boy." Ben sat up in bed.

"Victor! Surely you're not jealous of Benjy!"

"I'm not jealous of anyone. I'm fed up with your precious Benjy. Bored with his conversation. His everlasting narcissism."

"Well, he's young. He's eighteen."

"Nineteen."

"The young are all self-centered. I've never been able to get to know Benjy before."

"You'll get tired of that for a whole summer. Kick him out, Mira. You'd be doing him a favor. Let him grow up. Away from you. On his own. Come with me." There was a pause, a muffled laugh. Victor continued, "Look at it this way—a vacation, all expenses paid."

Mira said something Ben could not hear, and then her voice strengthened, as though she was walking up and down in her bedroom: "... expenses go on whether I'm here or not. If Benjy could come with me, I could close the house for the summer. I'm just being practical."

"There'd be nothing for Ben to do. There's no role for him. You don't need him to run your errands and scratch your back. All he'd do is fuck the little actresses, and I'm not paying for *that*."

"There will be nothing for *me* to do either," Mira pouted.

"You said you were taking the summer off."

"To take the summer off *here* is one thing. To rot out *there* is something else. When you leave New York people forget you."

"We could play house all summer. Just the two of us. I want you all to myself."

"That's sweet," Mira said acidly. "What would I do with myself? Sit on my ass all day in the god-awful place talking to the cows. Twiddle my thumbs while you're working with Yvonne. Have your dinner ready when you're good and ready to come for it."

"When did you . . . ?" Victor roared.

"Oh, no, my dear. Now if there were a good part for me . . . ."

"But there isn't. You know that."

"I know that. I know there could have been if you had wanted to arrange it that way. If you . . . ."

"Let's not start that again. I have explained that to you. Of course I wanted you. There were other factors involved. The people with the money . . . ."

"... If you had wanted to cast me instead of Yvonne . . . . All right! You didn't want to. You don't want me. You just want *some-*

*body* for the summer, but you don't want *me*. Hire a housekeeper."

"Oh, my God! If I didn't want *you*, I wouldn't ask you. I'm through discussing this. See that you're packed and ready on the 15th, and that's final," he thundered.

"Don't tell me what to do, Victor! I'm not some little ingenue angling for a bit part!"

Ben listened hard to the silence that followed. There had been many men sharing that bedroom with Mira, but none he resented as he resented Victor.

In mid-June Ben, ill with the flu, lay in bed. Mira brought him soup and tea when she thought of it. He slept most of the time, or counted the pictures thumb-tacked to the walls.

He heard the doorbell, the maid's greeting, Victor's booming answer. Suddenly Mira was in the bedroom with Ben, hardly looking at him, listening nervously for a cue. She stepped to the door and called down, "Tell him to come up. I'm with Benjy."

She quickly seated herself next to the bed, her hand on his hot dry forehead. "How are you, darling?" Ben was ready to rise and do battle on her behalf.

Victor filled the doorway. "Are you ready? Hello, Ben. How are you?"

"He's very ill." Mira did not look at Victor, kept her amber eyes on Ben. "I thought I made it clear to you that I wasn't going with you."

"That wasn't clear to me at all. I am expecting you to accompany me. Aren't you packed?"

"I'm not going, I tell you."

Victor put his huge hand on Mira's shoulder. "I'm not going to beg you any more," he said softly.

"You don't have to." Mira turned toward him. "It wouldn't make any difference anyhow. Don't you see how sick poor Benjy is? You don't think I . . . ?"

"You goddamn bitch!" Victor roared, swept her off the chair onto the floor, and stormed out, slamming the bedroom door, the downstairs door.

Ben struggled out of bed, dizzy and weak, and knelt beside Mira. She looked quite calm; she pushed him aside, stood, settled her clothing, tucked in a stray hair, gave Ben a conspiratorial little smile. Then she helped him back into bed.

**B**EN THOUGHT that would be the last of Victor Ackerman in their lives, and rejoiced, but in the fall he returned, as though nothing had happened. Ben became more solicitous than ever of Mira's comfort: phoned often when they were separated briefly, ran errands, fetched things she did not need. He turned up at parties he

suspected they would attend and sat at her feet; invited other house-guests to the country when Victor was coming, so that Mira's attention was divided. But Mira ignored Ben, placated Victor. He was scheduled to direct *Candida* and had promised her the lead.

Ben brought Mira her breakfast on a tray, sat on the edge of the bed. He said, "He's asked me to read, too."

"For what?" Mira crammed her mouth with toast and jelly. She licked her fingers carefully, one by one.

"For Marchbanks, of course."

"Marchbanks! You're not serious!" The butter knife clattered to the plate.

"Why not?"

"You're not ready for Marchbanks." She looked at him speculatively—he was a cheerful, rosy-cheeked boy, not at all the passionate neurotic.

"We'll let Victor be the judge of that," Ben said smugly, and was not surprised to be cast. He saw it as ordained—his big chance, the fabled story-book rise to fame from his debut in a serious role.

Mira suspected a trick of some kind, and was furious at first. But she knew that Victor would not jeopardize a show by casting someone inadequate in an important role. And it turned out to be a gimmick reporters liked—mother and son appearing together received gratifying publicity.

Mira was forty-four. (*Candida* was thirty-three.) In the interviews she let it be known that she had married very young, and glibly took five years off her age.

Ben memorized his lines, learned the blocking. Victor made very few suggestions, and Ben congratulated himself that he was doing well. Three weeks before the opening they were running through the play daily, then polishing rough spots.

For rehearsal Mira wore a long black skirt, white blouse and gold pin—to get the feeling of the character before her own costumes should be ready. She coiled her own long hair in a braid on top of her head. Furniture was set in place, position of walls and doors marked off.

*(Candida and Marchbanks are sitting by the fire. The reading lamp is on the mantelshelf above Marchbanks, who is in the small chair, reading aloud. A little pile of manuscripts and a couple of volumes of poetry are on the carpet beside him. Candida is in the easy chair. The poker, a light brass one, is upright in her hand. Leaning back and looking intently at the point of it, with her feet stretched toward the blaze, she is in a waking dream, miles away from her surroundings and completely oblivious of Eugene.)*



Ben began, "Every poet that ever lived has put that thought into a sonnet. He must; he can't help it." He continued, listening to himself with approval.

Victor called to them to stop, the second time through the third act, walking slowly, heavily up to the stage. "Goddamn it, Ben!" he shouted. "You have to forget that's Mira. That's not Mira, that's Candida. That's the woman you love. You're making *love* to her, damn it! Seducing! You stop short of screwing because her husband comes back." Ben nodded, swallowed hard. Mira strode indignantly to the apron of the stage. "Like hell! Candida would never have screwed Marchbanks!"

Victor's huge laugh overwhelmed her indignation. "Don't be too sure. She's a modern woman, isn't she? Independent thinking—says so herself. Anyhow," he turned at an angle from them, throwing away the line, but his voice boomed out clearly, "whether she would have or not is not the issue. Marchbanks thinks she will. That's what I want to get across." He walked up the aisle into the dark.

The actors resumed their places—Mira sat again in the easy chair, Ben in the small chair by the fireplace. The Morell, Phil O'Neal, sauntered off, to make his appearance later in the scene. Ben began, "Every poet that ever lived has . . ."

Victor lunged back toward the stage. "Ben!" he shouted. "Marchbanks is not a fairy."

Ben leaped to his feet, dropped the sheaves of poetry manuscripts from which he was supposedly reading. "Well, I didn't . . . I'm not . . . ." he began.

"Benjy!" Mira admonished.

Victor continued without pausing to listen. "He may be weak physically. No muscle. But he's very strong otherwise. Play him straight. No dangling wrists."

Ben clenched his fists, choked back anger. "That's right! That's right!" Victor shouted. "No whining: 'nothing but cry with rage when I am met with violence.' Strong! Do you understand? All right. We're going to do Act Three again." There was a suggestion of a smile in his voice. Mira peered into the theater, but Victor sat halfway back, barely visible, menacing.

Ben's voice shook as he began, "Every poet that ever lived has put that thought into a sonnet. He must; he can't help it." He looked at Mira. Her eyes were half-closed, looking down at the brass poker. She was thinking, "So, Victor. That's your game. Two can play." Marchbanks said, "Haven't you been listening? Mrs. Morell!"

"What?" Mira/Candida was truly startled.

Marchbanks: "Haven't you been listening?"

They continued, waiting for Victor to stop them. When he did not, they gained confidence. During the scene Marchbanks sat on

the hearthrug, leaning against Candida's legs, looking up at her. Later he leaned forward, got on his knees, turned, faced Candida, and clasped his hands, resting his arms on her lap. "May I say some wicked things to you?"

"Stop! Stop!" Victor called. "Take it again. Must be one smooth movement, Marchbanks. Not up-stop-knees-stop-over-stop. One movement. Rape is what he's attempting."

"Son of a bitch," Mira murmured. She tightened her fingers around the poker again, and Marchbanks dropped onto the small chair, seething, barely able to restrain himself, full of rage at the injustices that had filled his life to that point. The perfect moment was within reach. He lusted after Candida, knew he could have her if only . . . if only that son of a bitch Victor would leave them alone. He said again, "Every poet that ever lived has put that thought . . ." and they continued.

This time Marchbanks flipped over like a seal, throwing his arms around Candida's hips, leaning against her, their faces almost touching. She asked warmly, "And what have you to say to Candida?"

"I have come into heaven, where want is unknown," he breathed fervently.

Morell rushed on stage, flustered, "I hope I don't disturb you."

Candida and Marchbanks stared at each other a few seconds longer, then she flung him from her. "I have a *line* here," she challenged.

Phil said angrily, "I heard my cue. That's my cue, Candida, 'where want is unknown.'"

"I don't give a damn. Nobody is going to cut *my* lines! I say, 'Doesn't it make you happy to be able to pray? That happiness is the answer to your prayer,' blah, blah, blah."

Phil pointed to Ben, sprawled on the floor, stunned. "But *he* said, 'where want is unknown.' I heard it. I'm not deaf. I definitely heard it. That's my *cue*."

The three looked out toward the darkened auditorium for a decision. The assistant stage manager hurried on stage, pointing out the lines in correct sequence. Mira and Phil looked accusingly at Ben, who had jumped over Candida's lines to give his own. Victor remained silent, invisible, until the argument was settled; then he boomed, "Take it from the beginning."

Mira sighed and settled back into the comfortable chair. Ben picked up the poetry manuscripts in trembling hands, stared at them for composure, looked up, and said, "Every poet that ever lived has put that thought into a sonnet. He must; he can't help it." His voice cracked, "Haven't you been listening? Mother!"

Mira shrieked, rose from the chair, poker in hand, as though to

battle. "Mother! *Mother!* Did you say Mother? You little bastard! You're going to do that in performance, and I'll be the laughing stock of New York! Mother!" She brandished the poker. "I could kill you for that, Benjy," she screamed. "I don't know why Victor cast you in the first place. You're going to ruin this goddamn show!" She threw the poker down and stalked off the stage.

Victor slowly ambled down front. "All right, everybody," he said pleasantly. "Take a break. Take half an hour. Exactly half an hour, please. No more."

Ben's mouth opened and closed. He staggered off the stage, out the door, down the alley, blinking in the sudden shocking transition to late afternoon in the real world.

Charlie Zaworski, the prop man, watched him go. Bruno sauntered up to Charlie, dusting his work gloves against his thigh. "Think he's going to make it?"

"Three weeks to go? He damn well better."

"You know what *I* think? He ain't going to."

"Yeah? Why?"

"I got ten dollars says he ain't going to make it."

"You know something I don't know?"

"Naw."

"All right. It's a bet."

"Ten dollars!" Charlie reminded him.

**H**ER OLD FRIEND AND AGENT Barnet took Mira to dinner. She sulked in a corner of the taxi, eyes half closed, her fur pulled up to her lower lip covering her chin. In the restaurant the maitre d'hotel said, "Right this way, Miss Pahlmann," and gave them a prominent table in the crowded room. Mira felt obliged to return his smile, to sit erect, chest high, and to use graceful, sweeping gestures when ordering.

Barnet watched with amusement, ordered and sipped his drink. When he saw that Mira had relaxed, finally come off stage, he said, "Maybe Victor is trying to shake a better performance out of Ben. Out of all of you."

"It was going all right," Mira fumed. "It was playing very well. That little bastard had to blow it."

Barnet cut into his steak. "Maybe . . . maybe *you* should cool things a little. Not get him so steamed up."

"Who? Victor?" Mira smiled, her mouth full of food.

Barnet laughed. "No. Marchbanks."

"No. You're wrong." Mira shook her head, chewed thoughtfully, and swallowed. She gestured with her fork. "Candida is a loving woman. She has to be, or the thing has no meaning."

"Yes. But don't rape him on stage."

"I rape him! He is supposed to be on the verge of raping *me*, isn't he? That's what Victor says. That son of a bitch."

Three young men in army uniforms at the next table caught Mira's attention, raised their glasses to her. She laughed, threw a kiss. Barnet asked, "What would you like?"

"Another drink."

"I mean—the soldiers?"

"No. I'm too tired. I'm exhausted. All this turmoil. I could rehearse for hours if it weren't so emotional. Send them a bottle of wine, Barnet. The poor babies."

Mira returned her attention to her dinner and ate voraciously. Suddenly she pushed her plate away, pushed back from the table, and said loudly, "My God, it's impossible! It's just impossible!"

Barnet looked surprised. "You seemed to be enjoying it," he said mildly. "Mine's quite tender."

"That *play*! Benjy is my son. *Really* my son. The scene has *got* to build. If I don't play it with emotion, it's going to be so flat, no one will realize how important it is. It's the turning point of the play. And if I do—it's sick! Just sick!" She drew close to the table again, and attacked her dinner fiercely. "Oh, that Victor! That son of a bitch! What does he think he's doing? He's really out to get *me*."

"One way or the other," Barnet reflected.

"Do you really think so?" Mira turned her tigerish gaze on him, but he knew the heat in the yellow eyes was generated by Victor. "The hell with him," Mira said. "I'll show him."

"What are you planning to do?"

"My best, of course." Mira held her head high, determined to fight, although anticipating martyrdom. "Nothing is going to interfere with my performance. My audiences expect the best, and they're going to get it. You don't think I would let an opportunity like this slip by? Candida! Imagine! I may never have another chance at Candida in my life."

"And Ben"

"Benjy will have to take care of himself. He shouldn't have been cast in the first place. That was Victor's idea. Victor's mistake. He'll have to live with it."

After dinner, in the taxi, Mira put her hand on Barnet's sleeve. "I don't want to go home just yet. Take me to your place, darling. I feel empty. I don't want to talk to Victor now. Or Benjy." She leaned back against the leather. "Empty. Empty. All this commotion, and I don't *feel* anything."

In Barnet's apartment, Mira threw her bulky fur over the back of a chair. Barnet picked it up, shook it out, and hung it away. Mira had settled on the couch, her white arms spread wide across the top

of the back. Barnet stood at the window for a moment, looking out at the night.

Mira said dreamily, "But I never know what to feel unless someone tells me—someone like Victor tells me what to feel."

"What would you like to drink?"

"Scotch. Do you have any? Real Scotch?" Without a pause she continued in a matter-of-fact tone, "The truth is, I need Victor."

"That doesn't seem to be a problem." Barnet poured two Scotches.

"Don't be catty. It *is* a problem. He is an impossible man. I despise him. He wants to humiliate me. To settle an old score."

Later she said, "Benjy will fail. I told Victor that. When he cast Benjy—what an awful mistake! I insisted that he drop him immediately. He doesn't even *like* Benjy. If I hadn't insisted, he probably would have done it. He would have done it for someone else—anyone else. That's the way he is," she admired. "Now poor Benjy will have to do it for himself. I wanted to spare him that." She shook her head. "I begged Victor to drop him. Why should he fail in his first big role? Victor said I was pre-judging, that Benjy deserves a chance."

"And . . . ?"

"I agree! Oh, of course I agree absolutely! Nothing would make me happier. But not in *Candida*. Not with *me*. Later, perhaps, with more experience. Five, ten years from now. By then I'll be too old for the part. Victor said I was being unkind. I think it would have been more kind to keep Benjy out from the start. Out! Out!" She made a sweeping gesture, and laughed.

Barnet prompted, "But Victor says . . ."

"Victor hasn't said anything yet."

"You think he will."

"I *know* he will."

"Perhaps *you* could . . ."

"Nothing. I can't do a thing." She shook her head vehemently. "My hands are tied. You can see that, can't you? I can't oppose a man like Victor. He is so strong!" She smiled at some recollection, moistening her lips. "He always has to win. Victor. He's the victor, all right."

**B**EN DID NOT GO TO BED; he dozed a little, sitting upright on the couch waiting for Mira to come home so that he could talk to her, and overslept in the morning. He was awakened by a phone call from the stage manager, and rushed back to the theater without changing his clothes or shaving: upset, haggard, hungry, with a bitter expression on his usually cherubic round face.

The first act had already begun. He heard the voices of

Proserpine, Lexy and Burgess, and then Morell. "Oh, my God," Ben thought. "I'm almost on."

In the dim light off-stage, he saw Mira standing to one side, waiting for her cue. She wore her long skirt, the white blouse and a little cape, her own purse on her left arm, and a few old newspapers in the crook of her elbow. She drew herself very straight, then relaxed and smiled faintly, concentrating on Shaw's description of Candida: "the double charm of youth and motherhood."

She shifted the bag to the left hand, the papers and purse to the right. Then she set them all down. "Mira!" Ben whispered. She did not turn. She reached up under her skirt to pull the blouse down taut over her breasts. She smoothed her skirt, and re-tied the little cape, settling it around her shoulders. She picked up the bag, purse, and papers. "Mira! I've got to talk to you!" Ben said hoarsely. Mira gathered essence, force, for her assault on the audience which, at that moment, consisted of Victor, his assistant, and a photographer from *Life* who was doing a story on the play.

"I've got to talk to you!" He touched her elbow. Mira recoiled, stared at him vacantly, not seeing, hearing only Burgess on stage saying, "You will have your joke, James. Our quarrel's made up now, aint it?"

"Say yes, James," Candida said sweetly, off-stage, and swept on, lavish with kindness, charm, dignity.

Ben did not miss his cue, came on stage when Morell returned. Mira looked at him—more Marchbanks than Benjy—and saw expressions she had never seen in him before (*... miserably irresolute. . . acute apprehensiveness in youth . . . and his nostrils, mouth, and eyes betray a fiercely petulant wilfulness.*) It made her uneasy to see Ben looking so strange, but she thought that perhaps Victor's technique was paying off, and gave him credit.

Morell: "Come along: you can spare us a quarter of an hour at all events. This is my father-in-law. Mr. Burgess—Mr. Marchbanks."

Ben stumbled over words, went up on lines, but got through the act somehow, waiting for the axe to fall. Victor remained silent and invisible, his presence taken for granted.

At the break Ben burst into Mira's dressing room without knocking. "I can't stand it!" He threw himself onto a chair. "I'll never make it!" he said, and buried his face in his hands.

Mira said calmly, "Nonsense. You're doing all right. Better than before, in fact."

"I'm not all right. I'm sick, Mira," he whined. "I feel like jelly inside. I could throw up right now. My head is ringing. I'm so shaky . . ." He held out his hands for proof: "I might fall. Pass out!"

"Nerves. That's all it is." Mira sat on the little stool at the dressing table, and looked at herself in the mirror. "Never hurt

anyone."

"I can't go on like this, Mira. I keep thinking about the third act. It's approaching like some horrible disaster. I'll never get through it. I really can't do the third act—not after yesterday."

"You must." Mira turned around to look at him—really look at him for the first time—pale, wild-eyed, the corners of his mouth drawn down in a bitter expression. "You *don't* look so good, darling." She put her hand on his forehead, and he closed his eyes. "Cool," she said. "Nerves. Nothing more." She sat again. "Have a drink."

"What?"

"Calm you. Relax you a little."

"A drink?"

Mira laughed. "You won't be the first one who's tried it!" She poured a generous shot of bourbon, added a little water from the tap. She rummaged in the mess on the dressing-table for a spoon, finally stirred it with her finger, and handed the glass to Ben, who swallowed all at once.

Ben had not eaten for over twenty-four hours. He shuddered as the alcohol exploded in his system, then immediately looked flushed, less tense. Mira said, "There. That's better." When it was time to return to stage, Mira kissed Ben lightly on the cheek, handed him the bottle. "Here," she said, "Take it with you."

Ben's hands and feet were looser; his lips did not seem to want to function properly. He stumbled through his long speeches in the second act. "Line! Line!" he called to the stage manager, who prompted him. Each failure made him more and more nervous, until he was dancing from one foot to the other, wringing his hands, before he had an exit.

He returned on the line, "Is anything the matter?" which he drawled, a silly smirk on his chalk white face. He smelled so strongly of whiskey on his breath and his clothes that Candida, Morell, and Burgess stared at him in amazement, and blew the scene.

Victor advanced slowly to the stage. "What the hell is going on here?"

No one answered. They stared at him like guilty children. Ben hiccupped.

Mira asked, "From the beginning?"

Victor growled, "No. From Marchbank's entrance," and they moved back to their positions—Marchbanks and Burgess off-stage, Candida and Morell center-stage.

Candida: (*amazed*) "My dear; what's the matter?"

Morell: (*frantically waving her off*) "Don't touch me."

Candida: "James!!!"

Burgess stood in the doorway, waiting to enter, looking over his shoulder for Marchbanks, who was not in sight. He looked imploringly to Mira, who ignored him. Seconds later Marchbanks rushed in, wiping his lips with his handkerchief.

Marchbanks: "Is anything the matter?"

Mira glanced nervously into the dark auditorium, then back at Ben, lips pursed angrily.

Morell: "Nothing but this . . . ."

During the rest of the act, Marchbanks was not once where he was supposed to be according to the blocking. The others—Burgess, Morell, even Proserpine—pushed him into place, milling around, bumping into each other, trying to maintain some continuity in the scene. Burgess shoved him down onto the couch, Lexy pulled him to his feet again when the script called for it. Ben dropped lines, skipped over other actor's speeches, created such confusion that, although they tried to recoup, they could not—they could only stumble miserably on to the end. The silence from the theater was ominous.

Morell: "Well, I shall shew him how much afraid I am by leaving him here in your custody, Candida."

Marchbanks waggled a naughty finger at him. "Thass brave! Thass beautiful!"

Victor loomed up in the darkness, coming down the aisle at them like a battleship, sending before him a bow wave of anger. "You're fired!" he roared.

## Tidewater Rag

ERNEST KROLL

Striking the plantation piano through  
English lindens pinning the ivy cover  
Primly down toward Leeds Creek

baits with

Music a Chesapeake that wrinkles up  
The cove to Tunis Mills to find out  
Why from the ghosts of cabins no ghosts  
Sprang to swagger when the keyboard,

meant to

Minuet the manor, started ragging  
"Maple Leaf" in

dragging

whorehouse style.



# Shard

JANE VACANTE

when it is this subject  
of my love  
and your love  
there is the question  
of mechanisms

always the instruments  
of distance  
that first time  
you appeared like a plane  
taxiing down a runway  
in the dim evening  
your cool pale skin  
could have been  
light metal

you carry weapons  
in your head  
the wire sunglasses  
clasp your skull  
and give nothing away  
the lenses reflect  
a long gray street  
a woman walking  
destination unknown

# Hunter S. Thompson: Redefining the Beast

BARBARA LOUNSBERRY

ONE OF SEVERAL important distinctions between establishment journalism and the New Journalism is that the establishment journalist's attitude toward his or her subject is ideally neutral, objective, and impersonal, while the New Journalist's attitude is usually highly committed, subjective, and personal. Hunter S. Thompson's flamboyant and highly personal "gonzo" style of New Journalism offers a clear illustration of this difference. In fact, Thompson's savage, paranoid, drug-crazed persona is a literary achievement that makes his journalism work. The strategy of Thompson's best writing has been to set up a strange and terrible, fearsome and loathsome protagonist (the Hell's Angels in his first book, *The Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*; himself in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) and then to subtly show that his protagonist's opposition (society) is not really much different, that his opposites are not opposites at all, but actually one with him.

This strategy is most apparent in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971). In it, Thompson's surrogate, Raoul Duke, and his Samoan lawyer, Dr. Gonzo, are given what appear to be two diametrically opposed journalistic assignments: to cover the "freaks" in a dirt bike race called the Mint 400, and to cover the "cops" at the National District Attorney's Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. As it turns out, however, there is very little difference between the two assignments, or in Duke's coverage of them. Both take backseats to the major opposition in the volume, that between the two fantastically drug-crazed beasts (Thompson and his lawyer) and Las Vegas society. Thompson's strategy is to set himself up as beast. The fantasies and savage actions of this self-proclaimed monster prove endlessly entertaining to readers, yet Thompson's books always turn back on the reader, for while we are enjoying the fantastic antics of the protagonists, we are simultaneously being made aware that these antics are not so fantastic, that indeed it is the society at large which has called forth such savage behavior.

Thompson chooses Dr. Johnson's aphorism, "He who makes a

beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man," for his epigraph, and in the volume there are 156 references to 57 different kinds of animals, beasts, and monsters. Thompson's taxonomy leans toward reptiles: lizards (mentioned 7 times), snakes (6), frogs (2), toads (1), alligators (1), gila monsters (1), iguanas (1), scorpions (1), even pterodactyls (1). It also is fraught with real and mythical fright-inducing animals such as bats, rats, weasels, werewolves, and wolverines, and with a whole category if imprecisely defined "beasts," "brutes," and "monsters."

From the opening paragraph, Thompson articulates the central question of the volume. He and his attorney are racing toward Las Vegas when Thompson undergoes a hallucinatory experience involving an attack by swooping bats and manta rays. "Holy Jesus!" Thompson exclaims. "What are these goddamn animals?" (Popular Library ed., p. 18). A partial answer comes as Thompson quickly reveals that he and his attorney are animals. Thompson calls his attorney a "swine" (pp. 19, 71) and "pig" (p. 21), and the lawyer admits that his "heart feels like an alligator!" (p. 18). The lawyer's only hope, in turn, is to get to the hotel and check in before Thompson, a "triple Scorpio" (p. 96), turns into a "wild animal" (p. 22). Lawyer and client indeed are virtually interchangeable in the volume—they both at times use the name Dr. Gonzo, for example—and once in the hotel room, they take turns becoming beasts. The lawyer, high on LSD in the bathtub, begins to "howl and moan" to the accompaniment of "White Rabbit" and then starts "thrashing around in the tub like a shark after meat" (pp. 60-61). "What kind of goddamn monster *are* you?" Thompson asks him (p. 118).

Thompson (Raoul Duke) himself, however, is equally brutish. When checking into the Flamingo, he admits to looking like "something out of an upper-Michigan hobo jungle" (p. 108), and once in the room and high on adrenochrome, he is "a babbling nervous wreck, flapping around the room like a wild animal" (p. 134). In fact, this designation seems suitable to Thompson, who, when cruising past the University of Las Vegas campus, is tempted to pull over and mumble to a coed: "Hey, Sweetie, let's you and me get weird. Jump into this hotdog Caddy and we'll flash over to my suite at the Flamingo, load up on ether and behave like wild animals" (p. 172). At the end of the volume, his lawyer's bed looking like a "burned-out rat's nest" and the entire room like "the site of some disastrous zoological experiment involving whiskey and gorillas" (pp. 180-81), Thompson admits that "it was only a matter of time before they ran me down like some kind of rabid animal" (p. 197). Indeed the final picture which Thompson leaves with the reader is of himself as a "monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger" (p. 204).

What the reader may be slower to appreciate is that Duke and

Dr. Gonzo also exist in a remarkably bestial environment. They drive by turns by a Great Red Shark and a White Whale, and stay at the Flamingo, which is described as the “nerve-center of the Strip” (p. 106). Their other places of call are, significantly, Circus-Circus, which has the Leopard Lounge (p. 191), and a diner called Wild Bill’s cafe (p. 83). The music they hear is “White Rabbit” or “some gibberish by a thing called ‘Three Dog Night’ about a frog named Jeremiah who wanted ‘Joy the the World’ ” (p. 58). They drink Wild Turkey and order Coyote Bush baskets (p. 135), and Thompson, who wears a bird-shooting jacket (p. 189), spends his last money on “tin apes” that shake dice (p. 69). Indeed the two beasts seem to be surrounded by animal horrors—bats, manta rays (pp. 3, 5), weasels (pp. 12, 78), vultures (p. 21), and lizards (p. 118)—and on occasion they seem to feel these outside menaces are at their disposal, as when Thompson says, “I’ll put the leeches on you” (p. 5), or when he hopes to “call up” an iguana from the desert (p. 99).

Most significantly, the Las Vegas against which Thompson poses himself is a mad zoological domain as well. Indeed 78 of the 156 allusions—exactly half—to animals are not in reference to Thompson or his lawyer, but to elements of Las Vegas society. From the beginning, in fact, Thompson describes the social menagerie about him. The woman who gives them the \$300 is the “Pig Woman” (p. 11), and the car rental man is a “pig” (p. 14). At the Mint Hotel, the female desk clerk’s face changes, “swelling, pulsing . . . horrible green jowls and fangs jutting out, the face of a Moray Eel! Deadly poison!” (pp. 23-24), and the room service waiter has a “vague reptilian cast to his features” (p. 27). At the bike races a “frog-eyed woman” claws feverishly at the *Life* correspondent’s belt (p. 36), and Lacerda, Thompson’s own photographer, is described by his lawyer as a “dirty toad bastard” who is watching them like a “hawk” (p. 55). Back at the Mint Hotel, the people in the elevator are “like rats in a death cage” (p. 56), and later Thompson says that “These goddamn Jesus freaks [are] multiplying like rats!” (p. 134). The waitress at the North Star Coffee Lounge has “long sinewy arms” (p. 158), and the lawyer’s girlfriend, who paints portraits of Barbra Streisand, is described variously as a bulldog, a pit bull, “a beast that had just been tossed into a sawdust pit to fight for its life,” and a “drug-crazed hormone monster” (pp. 110-111).

And these are only the minor characters. Throughout the book, Thompson paints scene after scene in which his animal protagonists come face to face with Las Vegas bestiality. The first scene occurs in the bar of the Mint Hotel, when its patrons suddenly take on frightening reptilian aspects:

Right next to me a huge reptile was gnawing on a woman’s neck, the

carpet was a blood-soaked sponge—impossible to walk on it, no footing at all. “Order some golf shoes,” I whispered. “Otherwise, we’ll never get out of this place alive. You notice these lizards don’t have any trouble moving around in this muck—that’s because they have *claws* on their feet. . . . We’re right in the middle of a fucking reptile zoo! And somebody’s giving *booze* to these goddamn things! It won’t be long before they tear us to shreds. Jesus, look at the floor! Have you even *seen* so much blood? How many have they killed *already*?” I pointed across the room to a group that seemed to be staring at us. “Holy shit, look at that bunch over there! They’ve spotted us!”

“That’s the press table,” he said.

The next scene occurs out at the Mint 400. There Thompson encounters two dune-buggies full of what seem to be retired petty-officers looking for the race. The decorations on the buggies suggest Thompson’s view of them. “Both of their buggies were covered with ominous symbols: Screaming Eagles carrying American flags in their claws, a slant-eyed snake being chopped in bits by a buzz-saw made of stars & stripes, and one of the vehicles had what looked like a machine-gun mount on the passenger side” (p. 39). Here America is depicted as crazed and violent, and Thompson suggests that a violent military backlash is in the making as the military pursues the “freaks.”

Readers at first may think these wild depictions of animal violence are merely figments of Thompson’s crazed imagination, and thus more telling about him than about society, but the experience at Circus-Circus should convince them otherwise. Here Thompson and his lawyer note the odd behavior of the people obsessively gambling 24-hours-a-day on the ground floor, completely oblivious to a whole “circus” going on around them:

Right above the gambling tables the Flying Forty Carazito Brothers are doing a high-wire trapeze act, along with four muzzled Wolverines and the Six Nymphet Sisters from San Diego . . . so you’re down on the main floor playing blackjack, and the stakes are getting high when suddenly you chance to look up, and there, right smack above your head is a half-naked fourteen-year-old girl being chased through the air by a snarling wolverine, which is suddenly locked in a death battle with two silver-painted Polacks who come swinging down from opposite balconies and meet in mid-air on the wolverine’s neck . . . both Polacks seize the animal as they fall straight down towards the crap tables—but they bounce off the net; they separate and spring back up towards the roof in three different directions, and just as they’re about to fall again they are grabbed out of the air by three Korean kittens and trapezed off to one of the balconies.

This madness goes on and on, but nobody seems to notice. (p. 46)

This is Thompson’s point precisely: we are surrounded by animalistic behavior in contemporary society, but nobody seems to notice. It is the work of his hyperbole to make us aware.

**T**HOMPSON'S SECOND journalistic assignment, to cover the District Attorney's Conference, is a case in point. As the lawyer puts it: "This is a fucking *nightmare*! Here I am infiltrating a goddam Pig conference" (p. 141). Thompson himself variously writes, "Everywhere I looked I saw Pigs . . . me and a thousand pigs. Why not? Move confidently into their midst" (pp. 198, 95). In another place, Thompson says of the District Attorney's Convention, "It was clear that we'd stumbled into a prehistoric gathering" (p. 138).

The scene in which Thompson and his lawyer race with the two "Pig" couples offers a perfect illustration of Thompson's New Journalistic technique. First Thompson goes to great lengths to present himself and his companion as outrageously objectionable: "[My attorney] had been vomiting fairly regularly as we drove around the Strip, and the right flank of the Whale was badly streaked" (p. 151). The attorney begins yelling at "two hoggish-looking couples" in a big blue Ford with Oklahoma plates, "probably cops from Muskogee using the Drug Conference to give their wives a look at Vegas" (p. 151). After thus establishing their own behavior as beyond bounds, he then goes on to show how the policemen's (society's) behavior matches theirs move for move, and surpasses them in brutality:

The man in the back seat lost control of himself . . . lunging across his wife and snarling wildly: "You dirty bastards! Pull over and I'll kill you! God damn you! You bastards!" He seemed ready to leap out the window and into our car, crazy with rage. Luckily the Ford was a two-door. He couldn't get out.

"Jesus Christ," [my attorney] said. "Those Okies were getting excited. That guy in the back seat was trying to *bite* me! Shit, he was frothing at the mouth." He nodded solemnly. "I should have maced the fucker . . . a criminal psychotic, total breakdown . . . you never know when they're likely to explode." (pp. 152-53)

Thompson makes a similar point with another humorous set-piece, a description of his race with the California Highway Patrolman. The point is to make society (the patrolman) aware that it (he) has gone out of control, while Thompson has kept control himself:

. . . and the trick, at this point, is to suddenly leave the freeway and take him [the highway patrolman] into the chute at no less than a hundred miles an hour.

He will lock his brakes about the same time you lock yours, but it will take him a moment to realize that he's about to make a 180-degree turn at this speed . . . but you will be ready for it, braced for the Gs and the fast heel-toe work, and with any luck at all you will have come to a complete stop off the road at the top of the turn and be standing beside your automobile by the time he catches up.

He will not be reasonable at first . . . but no matter. Let him calm down. He will want the first word. Let him have it. His brain will be in a turmoil: he may begin jabbering, or even pull his gun. Let him unwind; keep smiling. The idea is to show him that you were always in total control of yourself and your vehicle—while *he* lost control of everything. (pp. 90-91)

This is Thompson's strategy precisely. He acknowledges that *he* is a beast and that he is aware of his actions; society, however, has no such self-knowledge or awareness. Thompson, in a perverse way, is in control; society is not. While the old man at the bar will lose control and attack the ape, who is merely sitting at a barstool, "slobbering into a beer schooner" presumably like all the other Las Vegas "animals," Thompson will claim the ape and try to take him home first-class on the plane as "R. Duke and Son" (pp. 189-90).

For Thompson, Las Vegas is like a "snake pit" (p. 129) where "like the Army: the shark ethic prevails" (p. 72); or as he says in one of his short passages of reflection, "For a loser, Las Vegas is the meanest town on earth" (p. 42). Ultimately, he implies, it is more freakish than the freakiest "freak":

Vegas is so full of natural freaks—people who are genuinely twisted—that drugs aren't really a problem, except for cops and the seag syndicate. Psychedelics are almost irrelevant in a town where you can wander into a casino any time of the day or night and witness the crucifixion of a gorilla—on a flaming neon cross that suddenly turns into a pinwheel, spinning the beast around in wild circles above the crowded gambling action. . . . Hallucinations are bad enough. But after a while you learn to cope with things like seeing your dead grandmother crawling up your leg with a knife in her teeth. Most acid fanciers can handle this sort of thing. But nobody can handle that other trip—the possibility that any freak with \$1.98 can walk into Circus-Circus and suddenly appear in the sky over downtown Las Vegas twelve times the size of God, howling anything that comes into his head. No, this is not a good town for psychedelic drugs. Reality itself is too twisted. (pp. 190, 47)

**T**HUS THOMPSON uses animal imagery repeatedly to show his two worlds as really one: he is a beast, but society is bestial too. He makes the point a second way, and widens the scope of his social criticism from Las Vegas to the world at large, through running references to newspaper and television. After the lawyer puts on his wild telephone performance for Lucy, for example, claiming to be attacked by "invisible enemies," he is then "back in his chair, watching Mission Impossible" (p. 130). When Thompson is fleeing from the Mint Hotel in a state of guilt and self-abasement, a look at the headlines helps him put his own "crimes" in perspective. These news stories tell of a "beauty" dying of an overdose of heroin, 160 G.I.s dying of illegal drugs, police fighting with anti-war demonstrators in Washington, D.C., Americans torturing Viet-

namese prisoners, and finally a Las Vegas pharmacy owner being arrested in a drug probe (pp. 72-74). In this context, Thompson's bizarre behavior seems the "norm" and even tame, as he pointedly observes: "Reading the front page made me feel a lot better. Against that heinous background, my crimes were pale and meaningless. I was a relatively respectable citizen—a multiple felon, perhaps, but certainly not dangerous" (p. 74).

The bestial nature of American life is made explicit through the strange news story of butchering at sea aboard the U.S.S. Crazy Horse (p. 200) and the newspaper article about the 25-year-old who pulled out his eyeballs after taking an overdose of animal tranquilizer (pp. 101-02). Certainly Thompson would be in sympathy with the choice of drug. As he says in a hypothetical conversation at the end: "I guess you're probably wonderin' what makes me sweat like this? Yeah! Well, god *damn*, man! Have you read the newspaper today! . . . You'd never believe what these dirty bastards have done *this* time!" (p. 197).

Thompson began his journey as a savage search for the American Dream, but ultimately he discovers the death of the real American Dream and of the existence of a surrogate one. The real American Dream is gone. In Part Two, Chapter 9, Thompson and his attorney wind up at a diner looking for the American Dream, and they are told it is on "Paradise Blvd." not far away. But as they pursue the matter further, they learn that the American Dream was first an Old Psychiatrist's Club, then a refuge for pushers and peddlers, then a mental hospital, and finally a "place where all the kids are potted." They finally arrive at the address to find a "huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds" and the information that the American Dream has "burned down about three years ago" (pp. 164-68). Thompson clearly believes that the American Dream has "died," and his notion seems to be that it was lost somewhere in the mid-to-late sixties. In a passage of reflection in Part One, Chapter 8, he writes:

Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six? It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era—the kind of peak that never comes again. San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of . . . it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash . . . You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning . . .

And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply *prevail*. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave . . .



So now, less than five years later [1977], you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost *see* the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (pp. 66-68).

Thus the American Dream, to Thompson, is gone. It has disappeared, perhaps like the dirt bike race which is lost in an incredible dust cloud that would hang over this part of the desert for the next two days" (p. 38). Thompson writes, "None of us realized at the time, that this was the last we would see of the 'Fabulous Mint 400' " (p. 38). With the real dream gone, what remains is the false and phony surrogate American Dream represented by Las Vegas, the District Attorney's Convention, and particularly by Circus-Circus and its owner. Before leaving Las Vegas, Thompson makes one final trip to Circus-Circus, where he has this telling conversation with his friend Bruce Innes:

"You *found* the American Dream? In *this* town?"

I nodded. "We're sitting on the main nerve right now," I said. "You remember the story the manager told us about the owner of this place? How he always wanted to run away and join the circus when he was a kid?"

Bruce ordered two more beers. He looked over the casino for a moment, then shrugged. "Yeah, I see what you mean," he said. "Now the bastard has his own circus, and a license to steal, too." He nodded. "You're right—he's the model." (p. 191)

The owner is the surrogate Horatio Alger of the surrogate American Dream. He lives in a zoo, with a license to steal, and he "hates the press worse than anything else in America" (p. 191). Thompson, who has been wondering all the way through the volume how the real Horatio Alger would handle Las Vegas, becomes the owner's counterpart. An obsessive reader of the press, without a license to steal, he still joins the Circus-Circus, the "fucking reptile zoo" of 1970's America, surviving as the only thing he can be: as a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger. With the real American Dream gone, Thompson is left saying "to hell with the American Dream [I'm] looking for the Ape" (p. 187). And so he mingles with the other animals, letting their animality justify his own, "a Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident" (p. 204).

## Poem

BRIAN WALKER

Words pouring forth  
evicted from sheltered nooks,  
huddling in the night

# Tracy

DAVID SCHUMAN

AS TRACY PULLED into Bishop, the setting sun was back-lighting snow banners on the Sierra crest. He parked by the Safeway and phoned L.A. from the booth across the street. He had to deal with two secretaries before he finally got through to Lane.

"Tracy Houston, Mr. Lane," he said, rubbing his hand back and forth across his three-day growth of whiskers. "Up in Bishop."

"Of course, Tracy. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing. I'm fine. I wanted you to know that I got the Case going, but the back-hoe needs a fuel pump."

"Can you work around it?"

Sure, Tracy thought. I can scrape with my hands. I can dig with my fingernails. I can move rocks with my goddamn teeth. "No sir," he said. "I thought I'd check with you before I ordered a new one."

"OK, Tracy. Go ahead. Whatever you need."

There was a short silence.

"What else can I do for you, Tracy?"

"Well," he said, looking out of the booth toward the east, where the Inyo mountains glowed pink in the dusk, "it'll take the better part of a week to get the fuel pump. I figured I'd wait around here till it comes, then take it on up and put it in. By then it'll be too cold to do much of anything else, so I'll just close down for the winter. Silver Peak and Mollie Gibson both."

"Tell you what, Tracy. Order the fuel pump, and while you're waiting, go on up and close Mollie Gibson. Then come back down, and by that time the pump will be in and you can take it up and close down Silver Peak. That'll save me a week's time."

"The trouble is, Mr. Lane, is that makes a couple hundred miles extra driving for me."

"I understand that, Tracy, but I don't pay you for sitting around Bishop. I'd be contributing to the delinquency of a minor. An old miner."

Tracy could hear Lane chuckling at his own joke.

"Call me when they're both closed." Lane said. "I think I can see my way clear to another bonus this year."

"Yes sir," he said. He thought: fifty goddamn dollars.

"Then in the spring, we'll see how you're feeling, and what my needs are. You'll be spending the winter with Herman?"

"Herman died, Mr. Lane. Last April. I got a trailer out on the reservation." Across the street kids were writing WASH ME in the grime on Tracy's old green Ford pickup. Dust, he thought. He'd emptied a half pint of Old Crow on the way down, and it was making him reflective. You leave anything outside long enough around here and before long it's dust. A dead cow turns into a rotting carcass, white bones, pebbles, dust in the wind. Paint chips and flakes and blows away. Tracy once again rubbed his bristly face. Even skin dries up, and after a lifetime you feel like a lizard with whiskers. "Last April the tenth."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"He was fifteen years younger than me."

"Well, Tracy, you'll outlive all of us."

I'll sure as hell outlive you, you flatlander son of a bitch, he thought. I'll be working Mollie Gibson and Silver Peak, Lida and Bristlecone Copper, too, when you're a goddamn stiff in some cemetery on a road with a number instead of a name. "I'm seventy-three now, Mr. Lane. My father died at a hundred and eight."

"That's wonderful, Tracy. I have to make some calls now."

"It ain't wonderful for me." He jammed a fist into his pocket. There was an area on his lower forearm where most of the skin had fused to the nylon jacket he'd had on in the fire after the accident. When they'd finally found a hospital that would admit him, and the doctor pulled away the jacket after all those hours, the skin came too, and the raw spot still hurt whenever it rubbed against rough fabric. So he pulled out his hand. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Lane, I'm not sure I'll be working for you in the spring, even if I'm still fit for it. I may be coming into some money."

"One of your prospects?"

"No sir. My lawsuit. From the accident. My lawyer in Vegas is suing the hospital that sent me away. For a hundred grand."

"You told me about that, Tracy. Now I really must hang up. Call me when you get everything closed down, and we'll let spring take care of itself."

"I don't think so, Mr. Lane."

"You don't think so? What does that mean, Tracy?"

Tracy said nothing.

"Have you been drinking, Tracy?"

His ankle was beginning to throb seriously so he shifted his weight off it, carrying himself on one leg and propping himself against the corner of the booth.

"I don't care what you do on your own time, Tracy, but . . ."

"Mr. Lane," he cut in, "what time I got left is all my own."

"Not when you're on a job for me, it isn't."

Tracy's weight-bearing leg was stiffening up, but his ankle still hurt when he tried to shift back to it. Outside, a man in a pickup, wearing a cowboy hat and a down vest, was arguing over a parking space with a Mercedes owner in double-knits. The last pink light faded on White Mountain Peak, and the long valley twilight began. Tracy took a deep breath. "In that case, Mr. Lane," he said, "I quit."

**I**N THE SAFEWAY he bought a bag of corn chips, two pork chops, a package of frozen carrots, Twinkies, a fifth of Old Crow, and a paper. The checkout girl remembered him from when she was seven and he was a crossing guard at the grade school.

He set the grocery bag on the little counter next to the sink, and even before he lit the pilot on the furnace he got out his reading glasses and went through his mail until he found the letter he'd been waiting for: from the lawyer in Vegas. Although the letter was less than a page long, it took Tracy about five minutes to read it through the first time. He lit the pilot and turned on the heat. Then he read the letter a second time, faster. There some words and phrases he wasn't sure he understood—*continuance, litigation, obstreperous*—but the gist was clear: they had shunted the case off on some new kid named Fleming, and this Fleming was reporting that the best offer he could get out of the Nevada hospital was fifteen hundred dollars, just what Tracy's stay in the Bishop hospital had cost him when they finally got him there. Tracy could, of course, press the lawsuit—but Fleming did not recommend that course of action because of the expense, the lengthy delays, and the odds against him recovering anything: the evidence showed that the Nevada hospital had reasonable cause to think that Tracy was not injured but drunk.

Fifteen hundred dollars, he thought. Seven hours pinned under that goddam pickup, freezing and burnt and bleeding, and three more while they bat me around from hospital to hospital like a hot potato. And who's this Fleming bastard? What happened to old man Foxx and his talk about a hundred grand?

He put away his groceries, except for the bourbon, and poured himself half a glass. The trailer was beginning to warm up, so he took off his wool jacket and hung it on a hook in the narrow closet. Taped to the inside of the door was a snapshot: Tracy, grinning, wearing his Tony Lama boots, a cowboy shirt with pearl buttons, and a turquoise slide tie. His thin black hair was slicked across his forehead and his glasses were perched cockeyed on his long straight nose. He had each arm around a daughter: June, the younger, pregnant; Joanelle, already a mother twice, hair piled on her head, plump and acting coy for the camera. Behind them was a stand of

cottonwoods, sheltering a ranch house made of timbers and random rock. Herman's house. Herman's camera, too.

The doorbell sounded. It was Roy Montes, telling him he had a phone call. "It's your daughter. She's been calling for about a week."

Roy's house was painted light green. In the almost-faded daylight Tracy could make out a couple of gutted cars set up on cinder blocks in the front lawn, hollow sockets where the headlights had been, hoods and trunks raised. They looked like heifers that had eaten too-rich feed, rolled over, and died of bloat. The phone was on the table by the front door.

"Hello, June," Tracy said.

"It's Joanelle, Daddy."

"Ah!" Joanelle lived in Los Angeles. Tracy hadn't seen her since Herman's funeral. "How are you? How're the kids?"

"We're all fine. How are *you*? Done for the winter?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm done."

"Listen, Daddy, I want to talk to you about Christmas. Did you get the tickets?"

"What tickets?"

"June and Richard are sending you an airplane ticket to Cleveland for Christmas. So you can visit them."

"Well," Tracy said, "that's very nice." Tracy had never been to Cleveland. Richard and June came to Bishop every summer for Richard's research; whenever he visited he always asked Tracy to talk into a tape recorder about the old days.

"We were wondering how long you'll be staying with us down here. Can we count on you for a week around New Year's?"

"Well, Jo, if the ticket's to Cleveland, I don't see how I could do that."

"Daddy, it's by way of L.A. We thought you'd spend some time with us on your way home. The kids are counting on it."

Tracy turned his back toward the dining room where the Montes family was eating. He hunched up his shoulders and lowered his voice. "Joanelle, honey, if this ticket is a present from June and Richard, I can't go and use it to visit you folks."

"I don't know what June wrote," said Joanelle, her voice taking on an edge, "but she made me and Joey pay for half of that ticket. It's from us, too, take my word for it."

"I do."

"So?"

"So," said Tracy.

"So you'll spend some time with us?"

"Maybe on my way out," Tracy said. "If I'm going all the way to Cleveland I may as well stay a while. I may decide to winter with them."

"Daddy," said Joanelle, "June said to make sure you came here *after* Christmas. On your way home. She and Richard are going to Jamaica on the twenty-eighth and you have to be gone by then."

"I see."

"So we'll count on you."

"Well," said Tracy, "I guess so."

They chatted for a few minutes, then he talked to his grandchildren and finally hung up. Back home, he poured himself another drink. He turned off the light and looked out the window. The moon was up, so bright it cast sharp shadows. The snowy Sierra peaks looked one-dimensional in the thin light. Tracy remembered the time he'd found the body up on Bishop Pass. He'd been hunting with Herman in Dusy Basin, behind the Palisades where they went every deer season, when an early blizzard came blowing in from the coast. They'd sat it out in a Forest Service cabin—enjoyed it, in fact, with a good fire, canned food, and whiskey until it ran out, snow piling up over the windows, an occasional flake finding its way through a chink in the logs, settling on the earth floor, and slowly melting. When the weather cleared, they packed up and headed out on snowshoes, and just over the pass, above Saddlebag Lake, they came on the body: a man about forty, a deer hunter from his clothes, but a flatlander, too, with smooth pale skin. He'd huddled up by a boulder and frozen stiff. They tried to pack him out but they couldn't even get him uncurled, so they climbed down and found a ranger and took a sled to bring back the body. Solid as a tree trunk, Tracy remembered, looking out toward the Sierra. We had to lash him on like a buck.

He drained his drink and went to Montes's to phone June in Cleveland. He thanked her for the tickets, and he told her that he couldn't make it for Christmas. He had to stay in Bishop because of his lawsuit. "They're real hopeful," he told her when she seemed dubious. "They got half a dozen lawyers on the case. It'll be worth my while to see this through."

June warned him about lawyers and their pie-in-the-sky promises. She begged him to reconsider, but he was adamant.

"When it's all over, in the spring, I'll take me a trip and visit you and Joanelle both. Or maybe what I'll do is send you all tickets to come out here. We'll have a reunion. I believe that's what I'll do," he said.

"Now Daddy. Don't go counting your chickens."

"I'm not," he said. "But I'm not leaving here this winter, either."

"Well, let us know if you change your mind."

"I'll do that."

"And be careful with the lawyers."

"I'll do that too," he said, and hung up.

THE GRAVEL ROAD cut through the desert and ended abruptly at a clearing some five miles east of the four-lane. Tracy left his pickup with several others and, in the moonlight, found the path that zig-zagged through the creosote and rabbitbrush. Soon he could smell smoke. He walked steadily in spite of his trobbing ankle.

The sweathouse was a low hut—old horse blankets, burlap sacks, and flour bags draped over a frame of branches held together with baling wire, and standing in willows by a shallow culvert next to a creek. In front, before a parting that served as doorway, was a fire pit with large basalt stones heating up on a bed of coals. Tracy slowly undressed, stacking his clothing in a pile next to the others': crouching, naked except for his glasses, he entered the hut. Sweat popped onto his forehead at once. His glasses steamed up, so he took them off and held them in his hand.

The only light came from the fire outside, and it gave everything a red-bronze tinge. Shadows jumped and shimmered as a light wind played over the coals and made the fire momentarily brighter. Tracy found an empty space on the ground near the entrance and sat down. In the back, deep in shadows, were two men he couldn't make out. Closer to him there were five or six he recognized. Near the center old Paul Moose sat on a cut-down yard chair with his son Louis at his feet. Louis was tending the rocks: every few minutes he'd scoop water from a small drum and pour it over the hot basalt he'd carried from the fire outside with a shovel. Steam would explode in a hiss, filling the hut. Tracy folded his legs, delicately finding a position that didn't hurt his ankle, and breathed deeply. Soon sweat streamed down his face, and flowed down his torso from neck and armpits. He kept his eyes closed, heard Louis take out a stone and bring in a fresh one, kept breathing slowly. Images crowded into his mind: Lane, June, deer on the highway, Nevada Hospital, his trailer, Silver Peak, Deadman Summit, Herman, Tule Springs, the Sierra in moonlight. His wife, dead now fifteen years. They passed in review for a long time and he let them enter and exit as they pleased. After five or six rocks had cooled, the images slowed down and finally the image he saw was the inside of the sweat, Louis Moose scooping water onto the basalt: so he opened his eyes. Nobody had moved. He noticed that some of the others were chanting. He closed his eyes again and his thoughts turned to the sounds of others' breathing and chanting, the hiss of steam, the feel of sweat, the sweat and the steam themselves: water from the Sierra snowpack melting into Rock Creek and flowing down the shoulder of the mountain in a thin vein, past aspen and lodgepole, over a fall, then fanning out and slowing down, to wind through the sage and the willow shoots in this culvert where Louis Moose har-

vested it and turned it into steam, into air for breath. In and out, over and over, eyes closed. In his mind they were breathing the mountain, bathing in the vapor they shared with it and with each other and with all who had sat in the sweathouse.

**H**E WOKE UP the next morning just at first light. The sun was not yet over the Inyo crest, and Tracy was quite cold under his blanket. He'd slept in his clothes.

For breakfast he finished last night's dinner: half a cold pork chop, some Fritos, and re-heated coffee. He washed the dishes, made the bed, threw away the mail. As an after-thought, he went through it in the wastebasket until he found the letter from the lawyer; that, he tore neatly in half.

There were no lights at the Montes house, so Tracy drove to the booth near Safeway. He got Lane's home phone from information, but the line was busy, so he walked down the block to the NAPA store and ordered a fuel pump for the backhoe. When he phoned again, he got right through.

"Hello, Mr. Lane? Tracy Houston, up in Bishop?"

"Yes, Tracy."

"I got your Case going, but I think the backhoe's going to need a fuel pump. I wanted to get your OK before I went ahead and ordered it."

"Tracy," said Lane, "you told me all that yesterday."

"I did?"

"You did."

"To tell you the truth," said Tracy, "I don't remember too much of yesterday. My ankle was hurting so I had a couple drinks when I got down. I called you?"

"You did. I told you to order the fuel pump for the backhoe and while you were waiting for it to close down Mollie Gibson."

"I'll be damned."

"Can you do that?"

"Yes sir. I'll get right on it. I'll call you when I have everything buttoned up."

"OK, Tracy. If you can't get me at the office, leave a message with Carol. The secretary."

"Will do."

Tracy had coffee at the grill and then drove down the valley toward Big Pine. The jagged, snowy Sierra loomed to the west, and to the east, in Nevada, were the arid and rolling Inyos. A cold wind was blowing tumbleweed across the four-lane. Tracy remembered the valley before L.A. stole the water—rich alfalfa fields and tall cottonwoods had dotted the desert. There'd been deer, bighorn sheep, and tule elk. He'd worked on the aqueduct—helped build it



during the day, and helped blow it up at night. Everybody had. But it finally went through anyway, as everybody knew it would, and now, thought Tracy, as he faced an unbroken line of cars and motor homes headed north, all we got here is tourists from L.A. And coyotes, to eat their garbage. The deer and the bighorn sheep and the tule elk—driven up into the mountains, where they freeze. Or get so hungry they wander down to the highway, and jump in front of headlights. And me, Tracy thought, I've been shooting deer for years, and eating them, too—I swerve to miss one and end up under the pickup in a ditch by the road all night.

At the Big Pine General Store, he bought a fifth and some frozen beef, then headed east on the county highway toward Joshua Pass and the Inyos. The sun was over the ridge. The air was cold and bright; it made his lungs feel brittle. Overhead the sky deepened to a dark blue. White Mountain Peak, up behind Mollie Gibson, seemed to throb in the morning sky. It was the only peak in the Inyos with snow. God damn, thought Tracy, if it don't look cold and clean. He took a deep breath. God damn if it don't look close enough to reach out and kiss.

## After Meditation On Maidu Peak

ROBERT JOE STOUT

Beneath green pines  
I pause: roots filament  
The hands I stretch into Other's lives  
And their words whirl against mine  
As I rise from a waking dream  
And walk,  
My voice a wild bird's cry.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

With this issue, we bid farewell—with fondness and regret—to our Business Manager, Jean M. Bullock. Jean received her A.B. from La Salle in May and plans to continue in editorial work. All of us who have worked with her at *Four Quarters* are grateful to have known this remarkable woman, this unique combination of good cheer and diligent work, and we wish her well.

We have not had official confirmation of her successor, but we have a most promising candidate in the running.

JCK

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# Contributors

**A** former newspaperman and government official, ERNEST KROLL has published four books. BARBARA LOUNSBERRY is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Northern Iowa. Her essays have appeared in *Philological Quarterly*, *Modern Drama*, *Black American Literature Forum*, and elsewhere. FRANK D. MOORE teaches English at the Community College of Philadelphia, and knows whereof he speaks. "Tracy" is DAVID SCHUMAN's first acceptance: we are sure it won't be his last. He teaches English and is an Assistant Dean at Deep Springs College, a "cattle and alfalfa ranch in the high desert of Eastern California." Since his last appearance here ("Return," Winter, 1980), ROBERT JOE STOUT reports there are no new "earthshaking events: books published, speeches made, marriages dissolved, new careers developed." Notwithstanding, his work appears regularly in *Commonweal*, *American Way*, and *American Education*. JANE VACANTE has traveled widely through Central America: she is currently a temporary consular officer in Mexico. Her next goal: the Galapagos Islands. She also translates Spanish poetry into English. BRIAN WALKER is a part-time janitor and full-time Haiku specialist who has published his work in many foreign journals (especially impressive are his Japanese credits, but he also lists Australian, British, Italian, Canadian, French, Greek, and Israeli publications, as well as American). JOANNE ZIMMERMAN is back with us: "Continuing Education" (Winter, 1980, in fine company with Mr. Stout) was an impressive debut. She lives in Homewood, Illinois.

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*Editor:* John Christopher Kleis

*Poetry Editor:* Richard Lautz

*Business Manager:* Jean M. Bullock

*Editorial Associates:* John J. Keenan, Russell F. Leib, Glenn A. Morocco,  
Br. Gerard Molyneaux, F.S.C.